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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [MCAP](#) [MARR](#) [IR](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: DEFENSE MINISTER MURR DISCUSSES URGENCY
OF NEEDS FOR LEBANESE ARMED FORCES

REF: BEIRUT 1242

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Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In an August 27 meeting, Defense Minister Elias Murr said the outcome of elections in 2009 will depend on the Christian vote. It is critical that the current majority be able to show results to Christian voters. Specifically, the people must perceive that Murr's relationship with the United States is delivering tangible results. The centerpiece of this tangible evidence will be approval for attack helicopters for the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), he emphasized. Murr will go to Saudi Arabia to request 500 million dollars to pay for attack helicopters and other military equipment for the LAF once he has President Sleiman's approval for the mission and sees a "green light" from the U.S. Congress for the equipment; he believes he already has approval from the U.S. Administration. He reiterated that his choice for LAF Commander was BG Jean Kahwagi (whom the cabinet appointed on August 29). Murr said he will delay his planned October trip to Washington. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) During a one-day visit to Lebanon on August 27, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (OSDP-ISA) Mary Beth Long and Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations, Low Intensity Conflict and Interdependent Capabilities (OSDP-SOLICIC) Michael Vickers met with Lebanese Minister of Defense Elias Murr at his home in Rabieh. Long and Vickers were accompanied by Major General Robert Allardice, CENTCOM J-5; Colonel Dave Huggins, ARCENT Commander Representative; Colonel Tom Henwood, ASD Long's Military Assistant; Lieutenant Colonel Bob Paddock, CENTCOM Lebanon Desk Officer; Commander Wyman Howard SOLICIC Desk Officer; and Melissa Dalton, OSD Lebanon Desk Officer. Also in attendance were Ambassador, NEA Deputy Assistant Secretary David Hale, and Defense Attache Lieutenant Colonel

David Alley.

MURR POSTPONES TRIP TO WASHINGTON,
DOES NOT WANT TO HINDER SLEIMAN'S VISIT

13. (C) Defense Minister Murr had previously indicated he would travel to Washington, DC during the week of 9 October. However, he now needed to postpone the trip for two reasons: First, he does not want to be seen as going behind President Sleiman to close any deals for equipment. (Note: Sleiman is currently scheduled to visit Washington on September 25. End Note.) Second, Murr thinks he should stay in Lebanon as the entire upper echelons of the LAF will be in transition during this same time period.

14. (C) Murr emphasized the importance of high-level Lebanese visits to Washington, DC and lamented the lack of recent visits. "We need to break this freeze (on visits) we have at the Presidential level," he said. He specifically wants to see a "normal visit, with normal meetings and normal receptions" in Washington, DC. By Murr's estimation, Sleiman should not worry about Hizballah's possible reaction that such a visit shows too much closeness to the U.S. when Hizballah's ally Syria is currently negotiating with Israel.

WE ARE LOSING THE BATTLE OF PERCEPTION;
PERCEPTION IS MORE IMPORTANT RIGHT NOW

15. (C) According to Murr, the perception of U.S. military assistance to Lebanon is not as good as it should be; "the reality is actually much better than the perception." Murr assesses that his expectations for U.S. assistance are at the

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appropriate level while other political leaders say that the USG is not doing enough. Their common criticism, according to Murr, is that the U.S. pushes him in front of Hizballah but does not give him the cards to play against Hizballah. Even with these criticisms, Murr acknowledged that, "the U.S. cannot come and do Saad's job to push the ISF to intervene."

(Note: This was a swipe at Future Movement Leader Saad Hariri's lack of action during the May 2008 clashes in west Beirut, when Saad reportedly waited forty-eight hours before issuing any orders, and then did so only feebly. End Note.)

THE NEXT ELECTIONS WILL BE DECIDED BY CHRISTIANS;
MARGIN WILL BE TWO OR THREE DEPUTIES

16. (C) Murr underlined for ASD Long and the U.S. delegation the importance of the parliamentary elections in 2009. This election, according to Murr, will put Lebanon and the United States in a very bad position if the current majority is not returned to power. "We will give Iran, through Hizballah, many years in power because they have the systems and the means to expand their influence if they win the majority," said Murr.

17. (C) As others consistently tell us, Murr said the real battleground during the next elections will be in the Christian districts. While the Shia and Sunni areas will, for the most part, vote with their co-religionists, Murr expects deep divisions within the Christian vote. It is these divisions that will result in a two or three deputy margin of victory in the upcoming elections. The 128-seat parliament will see "a split of 65-63, or 62-66," said Murr. For this reason, the eight deputies in the predominantly Christian Metn district will decide the outcome of the election in Murr's estimation. (Note: The Metn is Murr's district. Murr's statement may be self-serving for the interests of Murr and his father, a longtime political "godfather" in the Metn district, but his analysis also is plausible. End Note.) The Christians in this area must know that the U.S. is backing up the current majority with more

than just statements, Murr argued.

ATTACK HELICOPTERS ARE IMPORTANT
TO ENSURE VICTORY IN NEXT ELECTION

18. (C) "People like power and people like a winner," said Murr. The various groups in Lebanon must feel that Murr's group is backed up with concrete evidence. Such evidence would be even more important than financial backing. "Our common project is attack helicopters. I saw that many of (the ones offered) were not even armed like our Gazelles. People want to see the missiles. They want to see Cobras," said Murr. Murr said he does not consider the timing of the delivery as important as the announcement that they will be delivered to the LAF. "The agreement from Congress and the Administration is more important than the reality of getting them (to Beirut) between now and the 2009 elections," said Murr.

19. (C) Murr explained that a new red line is emerging in the Christian community. The Christians must now choose between a State of Lebanon or a State of Iran and Hizballah as the elections draw nigh. This is the headline that must be trumpeted in the Christian areas, according to Murr. "When (the Christians) have to choose between the LAF and Hizballah, they have to know that the LAF is backed by the U.S. with both material and technical support," said Murr. It is this support that will shape the contours of the political discourse of the next elections. Murr said that in the back of their minds, the Christians are cognizant of Hamas' activities and what a Hizballah victory could portend, especially given the deep financial and military support Hizballah receives from Iran. Indeed, people like a winner,

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and will move into the presumptive winner's constellation if victory seems imminent, according to Murr.

110. (C) "We only have two choices," Murr continued, "We must win, or we must win. We don't need much to do this." Murr said his relationship with the U.S. is delivering results now; however, he must maintain this perception among the people until he gets through the elections. "Perception is reality now. It is another problem to arrive to reality after the elections, but we must use this perception until we get through the elections," said Murr.

I WILL GET THE MONEY FROM SAUDI ARABIA
ONCE CONGRESS GIVES THE GREEN LIGHT

111. (C) Murr said he was waiting to go to Saudi Arabia for two reasons: one, he wanted the Lebanese government to be formed and for President Sleiman to concur with the diplomatic mission; two, he wants to have a "green light" from the USG. Murr believes he has both at this time, but wants to ensure there will be no problems from the USG, and particularly from Congress.

NEW COMMANDER WILL BE APPOINTED
AT CABINET MEETING THIS FRIDAY

112. (C) Murr reported that the cabinet would meet on Friday, August 29 to select the next LAF Commander. (Note: Cabinet approved Jean Kahwagi, whom Murr supported, on August 29. End note.) This is the first time that Murr has the occasion to have so much input concerning officer slating throughout the Army. Murr intends to present the candidates for LAF Commander to the cabinet based solely on their military qualifications and nothing to do with their political affiliations. Murr said he would present ten names to the Cabinet. Murr still believes that BG Jean Kahwagi is the best candidate for the job as he has been trained in the United States under the International Military Education and

Training Program as well as in Italy and Germany.

¶13. (C) Murr said he will have to closely manage Kahwagi during the first year because Kahwagi does not know anything about politics. In fact, Murr believes there will be problems changing his image among some people. "Sometimes you have to use visual flight rules, sometimes you have to follow the instruments," quipped Murr, a reference to both general and technical mentoring that will be required on the political fronts. (Note: Murr is very comfortable with Kahwagi on both the technical and political levels when it comes to USG programs. "He is hated by all political sides, but Aoun cannot veto him," said Murr. Kahwagi's battalion was nearly erased by a Syrian Special Forces battalion that attacked then-President Aoun in the Baabda Presidential Palace in ¶1989. Kahwagi lost 300 men in this battle while the Syrian Battalion suffered 750 killed. Aoun and his family safely escaped this dangerous situation because of Kahwagi's efforts. End Note.)

¶14. (C) Murr assessed that the opposition to Kahwagi by Progressive Socialist Party Leader Walid Jumblatt, a March 14 stalwart, is part of Jumblatt's initiative to achieve some level of rapprochement with Hizballah. Murr said that while negotiations regarding the LAF commander were ongoing, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, a Shia ally of Hizballah, told Murr "You are going to nominate someone that is anti-Hizballah, so I am going to be with you." In the cabinet vote on Kahwagi, Berri's and Hizballah's deputies expressed no reservations and joined the consensus approving him for the position.

¶15. (C) Assistant Secretary Long has cleared this cable.
SISON